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ABSTRACT

Understanding the core issues of a woman's relationship with her mother can be beneficial to women striving for a more fulfilling life. Both men and women suffer some degree of damage in their early relationships with one or both parents, and the relationship which appears to have the strongest influence on a woman's life is often her relationship with her mother. Some factors accounting for the ongoing effects of this attachment are the mother's traditional role as primary caretaker, a strong identification between mother and daughter, and the woman's traditional posture of passivity and dependence which tends to be transmitted to her daughter. Despite the daughter's strong desire for love, sexual fulfillment, and a separate identity, she experiences intense feelings of guilt, separation anxiety, and fears of retaliation as she undergoes the process of individuation, thus moving away from her mother. Significant life events, such as marriage, pregnancy, motherhood, and career success tend to manifest regressive trends and anxiety in women which can interfere with their further development. However, understanding the dynamics of maternal ambivalence helps women to work through these developmental crises and has an ameliorative effect on their families. (CC)

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THE MOTHER-DAUGHTER BOND

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Each step in a woman's development toward independence and sexual maturity is accompanied by conflict. Despite her strong desire for love, sexual fulfillment, and a separate identity, she experiences intense feelings of guilt, separation anxiety, and fears of retaliation as she moves away from her mother. Anxiety and regressive trends are manifest in significant life events that lead to individuation, such as marriage, pregnancy, motherhood, and career success.

Understanding the dynamics of maternal ambivalence, i.e., hostile as well as nurturing tendencies toward offspring, enables women to work through these developmental crises and has an ameliorative effect on the new family.

> A woman may bring any number of assets to marriage—compassion, wisdom, intelligence, skills, an imaginative spirit, delight-giving femininity, good humor, friendliness, pride in a job well done
>
> —but if she does not bring emancipation from her mother, the assets may wither or may be overbalanced by the liability of the fear of being a woman.
>
> Joseph C. Rheingold (1964)
> *The Fear of Being a Woman.*
> (p. 451)

In order to place this paper in perspective, it is necessary to introduce the concepts herein with the following statements. First, despite the apparently controversial subject matter regarding women's relationships with their mothers, the paper does not represent an anti-feminist viewpoint. To the contrary, understanding the core issues in a woman's most significant relationship has been beneficial to women who are striving to fulfill themselves.

Second, the focus of the paper is not representative of a sexist point of view. To the contrary, the paper describes dynamics occurring in *all* relationships where individuals are defended against closeness and intimacy.

Both men and women suffer some degree of damage in their early relationships with one or both parents, especially when the parents themselves have been deprived or limited by their own upbringing.

The paper draws attention to negative aspects of the relationship that appears to have the strongest influence on a woman's life—her relationship with her mother. Several factors account for the ongoing effects of this early attachment: (1) The mother's role as primary caretaker still exists in our culture in spite of changes in the structure of contemporary nuclear families; (2) A stronger identification exists between mothers and daughters than between mothers and sons; and (3) Until very recently, cultural prejudices have largely prevented women's full participation in social, economic, and political arenas. The traditional roles that women have been forced to accept have led them to adopt a posture of dependency and passivity, which, in turn, they transmit to their daughters.

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON WOMEN

One major influence in the lives of women is that for centuries they have been subjugated by a patriarchal society. Historically, most women accepted the socially defined identity of being the "second sex," and as a result of discrimination felt incapable of actively determining the course of their own lives. The lack of access to real power led them to adopt indirect or passive methods in attempting to fulfill their human potentiality. The tendency to utilize passive-aggressive techniques is transmitted in-

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tergenerationally through the process of identification and imitation.

The imprinting of these behavior patterns on the daughter's personality through the mother's influence as a role model is an important dynamic operating in the lives of most women. When women break out of this traditional pattern or stereotype and surpass their mothers, either personally or vocationally, they tend to experience considerable guilt, anxiety, and fear of retaliation. These emotional reactions, in turn, interfere with their further development and often precipitate regressive behavior. Women's struggles against these powerful internal forces have a more debilitating effect on them than the economic or social restrictions that still exist in our culture.

THE CENTRAL ROLE OF THE MOTHER

In our culture, the function of the mother as the primary caretaker of children is of the utmost significance because it exerts a profound influence on the psychological well-being of the family. Some degree of frustration is inevitable in a child's early interactions, because no parent can successfully anticipate the needs of another at all times. However, when this frustration is compounded by immature or rejecting mothering, it leads to a combination of intense rage and emotional hunger in the child. These negative feelings have no acceptable outlet and therefore manifest themselves in self-hatred, the building of defenses, passive aggression, and the withholding or holding back of positive, self-affirming responses.

In the case of female offspring, where the identification with the mother is strongest (Deutsch, 1944), the daughter's hurt or angry response is transformed into a form of withholding that resembles the mother's negative personality traits and defense patterns. Unfortunately, the defensive incorporation of maternal characteristics is heightened during times of stress and emotional pain. Therefore, in general, the daughter tends to incorporate and compulsively act out her mother's most negative characteristics, traits that were not necessarily representative of her mother's personality as a whole. Paradoxically, the more the daughter resents the mother and suffers at her hand, the more she tends to imitate her behavior and attempts to form an imaginary connection or bond with her.

It is important to note that women who have been deeply hurt in their relationships with withholding mothers do not *consciously* want to imitate them. In fact, these women are often very critical of their mother's inadequacies, negative characteristics, and general style of relating. Indeed, the process of identifying with and of introjecting withholding patterns is largely an unconscious phenomenon. Over a long period of time, the daughter's holding back of positive responses and pursuits becomes automatic and involuntary, and the pattern is repeated with her own children.

Repercussions of the mother-daughter bond have a destructive effect on women's relationships with the men in their lives and later on the children in the new family. However, it is most important to emphasize the powerful limitation it imposes on each woman's sense of self. Its stultifying impact on their feelings of self-worth, achievement, and personal power is far greater than most clinicians realize. In addition, this problem is compounded because women tend to feel guilty, depressed, and demoralized to the extent that the symbiotic tie with their mothers interferes with their most intimate relationships.

In exploring this controversial, emotion-laden topic, we hope that the reader will look at the subject objectively, with feelings of empathy for both men and women. Clinical analysis of data, combined with compassion, will help to prevent the misuse or misunderstanding of our data in the direction of anti-female, anti-mother bias, or defensive sexist attitudes on the part of both men and women. We feel strongly that sexist attitudes and stereotypes applied to either sex are psychologically damaging and are responsible for a great deal of human misery.

UNDERLYING DYNAMICS OF THE MOTHER-DAUGHTER BOND

In order to better understand the specific dynamics of the destructive tie between mother and daughter, it is important to describe the concept of the fantasy bond. The concept is a basic tenet of the author's theoretical approach and has been described in a number of works (Firestone, 1984, 1985, 1987a, 1988). The fantasy bond is defined as an imaginary connection and symbiotic tie with an object that acts as a compensation when there is a deficiency in emotional warmth and caring. The original fantasy bond is formed under stress in an attempt to cope with the pain of emotional deprivation, separation, and rejection in early life. The most primitive aspect of the bond is the infant's fantasy or internal image of

being merged with the mother's body, most particularly the breast (Firestone, 1984). This bond with the mother is later extended to the father and to the family at large. The fantasy process, combined with self-nourishing habit patterns such as thumbsucking, stroking and clinging to transitional objects, and masturbation, acts as a form of self-parenting to alleviate emotional pain. It fosters a feeling of pseudo-independence. This bond or self-parenting process exists to some degree in every individual. The extent to which individuals come to rely on this fantasy process for gratification is proportional to the degree of deprivation.

Other theorists have noted the prevalence of destructive bonds in couple and family relationships. Hellmuth Kaiser, one of the first clinicians to write about a "delusion of fusion," described it as the universal symptom and delineated its manifestations in therapy settings:

> As his adult intellect does not allow him to maintain an illusion of unity he [the patient] does something which is a compromise between fusion and mature relationship: Namely, he behaves either submissively or domineeringly. (Cited in Fierman, 1965, p. xix)

Jurg Willi (1975/1982), Wexler and Steidl (1978), Mark Karpel (1976), R. D. Laing (1969/1972), and Murray Bowen (1976) have pointed out various dimensions of destructive bond formation in their work. They contributed to our understanding of anxious attachment and its implications for marriage and family life. The authors have learned to distinguish between maternal responses that are genuinely loving and maternal reactions that are based on immaturity and emotional hunger toward children. The latter have a very destructive effect on children's ego development, capacity for reality testing, and emotional maturation.

ANXIETY AROUSED BY SEPARATING FROM THE MATERNAL BOND

> We offer men our bodies if they will marry us; afterward, we are mystified because we are less interested in sex now that he is "ours." What we wanted all along wasn't sex, but closeness. *Mother most rewarded us with symbiotic love when we denied our sexuality* [Italics added]. Sex, even with its intimate pleasures, becomes merely a means to an end; nothing is sweeter than symbiosis. Grown women, we find we have manipulated ourselves out of our own sexuality.
>
> Nancy Friday (1977)
> *My Mother/ My Self*, (p. 83)

The process of individuation, whereby children increasingly differentiate themselves from their mothers, occurs naturally throughout children's lifetimes. Each step is generally accompanied by reminders of existential aloneness and separateness. The developmental task is characterized by feelings of anxiety in children of both sexes. In the large majority of family constellations, the son, in differentiating himself from the mother, gradually shifts his identification to the father. The daughter remains finely tuned to the mother. For their part, mothers generally tend to identify with their daughters more than with their sons. Genevie and Margolies (1987) report, for example, that:

> Our findings show that mothers form this primary relationship more readily with their daughters whom they view as extensions of themselves: more dependent, more emotional, more bonded by the primary mother-child tie. (p. 291)

Each step in a woman's development toward sexual maturity is filled with conflict. She is torn between expressing her love and sexual desire in relation to a man, which she perceives as a separation from her mother, and holding back these responses, which affirms the maternal connection. Furthermore, as she matures, the daughter may actually fear retaliation from the mother for seeking adult sexual fulfillment. In my own clinical work, I have found that both separation anxiety and fear of the mother's envy or vindictiveness are experienced by women at crucial points in their sexual development. In his book, *The Mother, Anxiety, and Death*, Joseph C. Rheingold (1967) has drawn attention to this aspect of the separation-individuation process as it affects women:

> In the psychopathology of women one regularly discovers an association of the masochistic or hostile dependent kind of relationship with the mother and the fear of mutilation and annihilation as punishment for feminine self-fulfillment—indeed, for just being a female. (p. 96)

In an earlier work, Rheingold (1964) contended that most young girls are terrified of the mother's

feelings of hostility and jealousy, and, as a result, they attempt to turn to the father for protection. However, this move toward the father is similarly fraught with danger because of the mother's envy, and the girl retreats once again. In *Between Women: Lowering the Barriers*, Paula Caplan (1981) describes how daughters often adjust to their mother's envy:

> It is a heavy burden to feel envied by one's mother. This is especially true because anger so often accompanies envy.... How does a daughter deal with her mother's competitiveness with her or jealousy of her accomplishments? Often, she does one of two things (or tries both at different times): she reduces her efforts to achieve (or at least begins to conceal them from her mother), and she puts emotional or physical distance between herself and her mother. (p. 120)

In describing adolescent girls who have already begun to renounce their sexual identity in order to appease their mother's anger, Rheingold (1964) wrote:

> We observe many more girls who exhibit the "mutilated" state that becomes so distinctive in adolescence and adult life. They wear a hurt, intimidated look, seem burdened with distrust and guilt, and show not a trace of femininity or any other kind of self-affirmation. (p. 266)

As a clinician, Rheingold demonstrated an unusual understanding of the conflict that prevails in women throughout their lives. On the one hand, women desire sexual fulfillment and independence; yet, at the same time, they are drawn back to the mother through fear of her retaliatory powers:

> The girl has no choice but to enter into the rivalry.... The threat of retaliation, however, [eventually] forces her to abandon her aspirations (to be a better wife than mother) and surrounds all women-roles with danger. (p. 267)

> A woman begins fleeing her mother in early childhood and never ceases trying to deliver herself from the psychic bond to her.... The drives to attain freedom never succeed.... She is always her mother's daughter. (p. 272)

The authors emphasize that women's retreat from mature sexuality is primarily affected by their desire to hold onto a dependency bond or connection with the mother rather than their fear of the mother's aggression. However, we do not deny the importance of Rheingold's interpretation that fear of the mother's retaliation is an important causative factor as well.

Rheingold's interpretations of his findings are consistent with the hypotheses my associates and I have derived from clinical material. It has been our experience that most women do indeed remain their "mother's daughter," bound to the mother *not* by natural affection, but by fears of aloneness or vindictive retaliation.

For other perspectives on maternal ambivalence, see *Of Woman Born* (Rich, 1976) and *Mother Love: Myth and Reality* (Badinter, 1980/1981). Ms. Rich explores her ambivalent feelings about motherhood and toward her children in a personal journal. Dr. Badinter documents the varying forms of maternal indifference, cruelty, dissatisfaction, and affection over the past four centuries of French history.

Guilt about Separating from the Maternal Bond

A self-denying mother arouses powerful feelings of guilt in her children. By denying herself gratification, fulfillment, or sexual pleasure a woman not only hurts herself, she also imposes subtle restrictions on her daughter's life. Her daughter, out of a sense of guilt, will turn her back on her own development and retreat from an adult, womanly posture.

This guilt becomes more evident as young women take tentative steps toward independence or move away from emotional ties with the family. In the case of the adolescent girl, the guilt involved in breaking away or "leaving her mother behind" is often intense and debilitating, especially when her mother is depressed, self-hating, self-destructive, or childlike in her orientation.

Manifestations of the Daughter's Guilt in Her Adult Life

As noted earlier, the children of mothers who withhold feelings of love suffer from unsatisfied longings, emotional hunger, and rage at being rejected. Children, and later adults (of both sexes), generally feel guilty about feelings of hostility toward their parents and frequently turn their rage against themselves.

The daughter's guilt about the anger she feels toward her mother causes her to hate herself. When she is forced to renounce the loving feelings she

originally felt toward her mother (the most important person in her life), she becomes disoriented and resentful. As a young girl, she learned by observation and imitation to be like her mother and feels strange or uncomfortable when she is different from her role model.

Guilt reactions cause women to turn their backs on important personal and vocational goals if these pursuits differ from or threaten to surpass their mothers' achievements. For example, a study by Jill Suitor (1987) reported empirical data indicating guilt reactions in women who surpassed their mothers' level of education. Kim Chernin (1985), in *The Hungry Self* (a study of eating disorders), also commented on her observations of guilty women:

> The contrast for most women between their life of possibility and their mother's life of limitations continues to haunt them through every stage of growth and development, making separation a perilous matter, for it involves inevitably this problem of surpassing a woman who must, in her lonely sense of failure at life, perceive the daughter's movement into the world as a betrayal and abandonment of the identity they share.
> (pp. 57-58)

In our experience, we have found that women manifest intense guilt reactions when they achieve success in areas where their mothers failed, and often compensate by regressing in other areas. This is a primary factor contributing to women sabotaging their successes and achievements. The following case history illustrates long-term regressions that can occur when women develop personally and vocationally and symbolically leave the mother by leading different or "better" lives.

> After a year of individual therapy, Carol B., a serious, reserved young woman of 24, began to question her mother's authority and challenge her image as the "perfect" mother. Carol's mother was a highly respected chairperson of the history department at a nearby college. She had divorced the patient's father when Carol was 3 years old. The mother moved in a large social circle of women associates and friends. Her current life was completely devoid of male companionship and, according to the patient, her mother spoke of men with derision and bitterness.
>
> In early sessions, Carol, an unusually perceptive and intelligent person, rapidly gained emotional and intellectual insight into the dynamics of the relationship with her mother. Carol spoke in her therapy group about her mother's rejection of her father and her need to control family members. In addition, she noted her mother's sexualized involvement with dependent and ingratiating women. Altogether, her insight was clear, compassionate, and powerful.
>
> During this period, Carol gradually unfolded as a woman. Her previously drab, unfeminine appearance and quiet reserve were replaced by a brightness, vitality, and lively sense of humor. Gradually she developed a stronger sense of identity as a sexual woman, in stark contrast to her mother's asexual orientation. Carol moved out of the family home into her own apartment and decided to pursue an advanced degree in psychology. She lost weight, began to dress stylishly, and for the first time became involved in a sexual relationship with a man for whom she cared a great deal.
>
> At this point in her therapy, Carol appeared on the threshold of changing deep character defenses of submission and catering to her mother, attitudes she had extended to other women who served as symbolic substitutes for her mother.
>
> One day, Carol's mother visited her at her apartment, and the patient found herself excited by discussing her career plans and some of the insights she had gained in the course of her therapy. She was totally unprepared for her mother's angry reaction. Stunned, Carol listened as her mother unleashed an irrational diatribe against her and her therapist for his "bad" influence on her. At first Carol attempted to defend her point of view; however, the combination of her mother's hysterical anger and tears effectively brought Carol "back into line." The next day Carol spent hours on the phone reassuring her mother and reestablishing the bond with her.
>
> Already torn by guilt about achieving more satisfaction in her personal life than her mother, the patient was unable to recover her good feelings after the incident. She began to deny or repress the insights she had gained in therapy. She "forgot" important perceptions she had about her

mother's controlling posture and destructive role in the family. She lost sight of her mother's manipulation through weakness and negative power.

It was disheartening for those who knew Carol to see the rapid deterioration in her self-confidence following the meeting with her mother. Several weeks later, Carol dropped out of her therapy group. Some time later, she terminated individual therapy and gradually withdrew from the relationship with the man whom she had planned to marry.

In turning against her realistic perception of her mother's hostility and inadequacy, the patient suffered a serious regression. Eight years later, a follow-up showed that Carol had put on a great deal of weight and had retreated from relationships with men. She still lived alone—physically separate from her mother, yet emotionally tied to her.

This case is not unusual. We have documented numerous cases similar to the one just described. Guilt reactions precipitated by breaking "bonds" often predispose serious regressions (Firestone, 1987b). For example, a patient who was progressing well in therapy and changing her hostile, suspicious views of men received a phone call from her sister. The sister, who was seriously disturbed psychologically and cynical toward men, had played a significant role in raising our patient and meant a great deal to her. After the patient told her sister about her progress and her hopeful outlook, she asked her sister how *she* was feeling. The sister's bitter reply was: "You really want to know? I'll tell you how I feel—I'm so depressed I feel like killing myself." Her sister's response acted to turn this patient against herself.

Within a week of this unpleasant call, this patient, torn by unbearable guilt feelings about her sister's misery, suddenly left her boyfriend and resumed an isolated life-style. It was literally impossible for her to tolerate her guilt about the contrast between her own happiness and her sister's depression and hatred of men. She refused to break the bond with her sister, and instead sacrificed her own pursuits. It is both shocking and disturbing how powerful these contacts can be in leading to regressive behavior when a person has a fragile new identity.

Women's Guilt in Relation to Symbolic Substitutes

> Female anxiety and guilt about ambitious strivings and the exercise of competence are so ubiquitous that the "fear of success" syndrome has become a household word. (Lerner, 1988, p. 195)

Many women not only fear the loss of the mother but have the same reactions to symbolic substitutes in their present-day lives. We found that women take their cues from other women in their surroundings in terms of their emotional state or their tendencies to be self-denying. Rather than compete with another woman who is depressed or distant from the man in her life, a woman is more likely to withdraw and become self-denying herself. She is often too guilty to separate herself from less fortunate women and maintain her own pursuit of sexual fulfillment or other personal goals. She tends to respond adversely to unconscious social pressure exerted by other women who have given up their active pursuit of goals. When the women in her interpersonal environment act weak and defensive, it has a detrimental effect on her personal life and goal-directed activities.

Most women are afraid to be nonconformists, that is, to stand out from the "sisterhood." For example, the stereotyped attitudes toward men expressed by women in neighborhood meetings over coffee or in office settings are rarely, if ever, challenged by women who disagree. Cynical and/or condescending views about men are accepted as foregone conclusions by many women, who use this forum to verbalize attitudes that justify their withdrawal and withholding. Moreover, there is increasing social pressure from the media and literature supporting a sexist, prejudicial view of men that holds them accountable for women's dissatisfaction in marriage and life in general. This distorted societal view, in turn, exerts a strong pull on each woman to feel victimized or exploited by men.

SIGNIFICANT EVENTS THAT AROUSE ANXIETY AND GUILT IN WOMEN AND THEIR EFFECTS

Marriage

> Just as the fate of personality development hangs largely on the effect of mother on child, so, I believe, the fate of a marriage hangs largely on the effect of wife on husband.... Overwhelmingly

> the flow of crucial influence is from the woman to the man, requiring adaptation or defense on his part. (Rheingold, 1964, pp. 421-422)

The concept of marriage has very different unconscious significance for men and women. For women, movement toward sexual intimacy with a man threatens the mother-daughter bond and symbolizes a step *away* from the mother and a loss of the hope of ever satisfying their longing for maternal love. For men, marriage symbolizes the fulfillment of their desire for close, affectionate contact with the mother that they have longed for since early childhood. For this reason, men and women have a conflict of interest and are unconsciously at odds with each other after the early stages of their relationship.

Rheingold's (1964) thesis supports the authors' views of this basic difference and its impact on the couple's relationship: "This [initial] level of compatibility is not...long maintained because marriage attempts to integrate mutually alien worlds of being, that of the man and that of the woman" (p. 423).

Both extensions of the bond with the mother are unhealthy. It is ironic that women are drawn to marriage as an imitation of their mother, yet at the same time they fear this movement toward further individuation and see their independent actions and mature expressions of sexuality as replacing the mother. Their attitudes toward marriage are necessarily ambivalent. Their defenses alienate them from men and predispose a destructive bond in place of genuine intimacy.

This statement should not be construed as being a denial of the destructive effect that men can have on women and on the marriage. Men who have been damaged in their sexuality can develop a variety of personality disorders or dysfunctional styles of relating. Many men, for example, become desperate, dependent, and possessive of their mates. Others cut off their feelings, becoming distant and uncommunicative; still others develop compensatory feelings of vanity and demand a build-up from their partners.

Men also tend to act out aspects of the bond with their mother in their relationship with their mates, exerting a negative impact on the marriage. They interpret their partner's positive or negative sexual responses as symbolic of the mothering they are unconsciously seeking. Many men behave in a childlike manner in relation to their mates, seeking definition, and are either submissive or domineering. Often they are emotionally hungry and willing to sell out on their own point of view when the women in their lives are unresponsive, depressed, or self-hating, in order to maintain the bond.

Rheingold (1964) suggested that the degree of maternal destructiveness that was present in a woman's relationship with her mother is the single most reliable predictor of the success of her marriage. He stresses the fact that marriage once again arouses a woman's fear of her mother, a familiar sense of dread that she has lived with since infancy.

> Marriage is a crisis for the woman.... Next to pregnancy and becoming a mother, marriage poses the greatest threat because it represents two bold acts of self-assertion: assuming the status of the married woman and entering into a publicly announced heterosexual relationship. (p. 437)

Most women sacrifice their sexuality in order to hold on to the mother and relieve their unconscious fears of punishment. In this sense, they are fearful of becoming mature women. When this happens, women take on a sameness with the mother that makes them hate themselves. Their goals and personal relationships are contaminated by feelings of unsatisfied emotional hunger, and their feeling for the men in their lives is distorted.

Indeed, rather than cope with the separation anxiety and guilt inherent in moving away from the mother, many women find themselves experiencing a renewed closeness with their mothers following the wedding ceremony. Nancy Friday (1977) commented on this "reunion" in *My Mother/My Self*:

> The truth is that in marriage we become the little girl who once took down the cookie sheet and imitated mommy. We also become mommy.... We do not mean to ally with her, but whose standards are we living up to when we give up our identity? Did he ask it of us? (p. 345)

In her interviews with over 200 men and women, Ms. Friday reported that the majority of the wives imitated their mother's style of relating.

Many women who profess goals of future marriage and family tend to be disturbed at the actual prospect of becoming involved in a long-term relationship with a man or the thought of having a child. In our clinical experience, we are familiar with countless cases where women reported having perverse or angry responses to acknowledgments of love from men whom they love.In one instance, a woman was

shocked at the sarcasm she expressed in reaction to her boyfriend's talking about his wish to make a serious commitment to the relationship. The couple had just spent a romantic evening together when the man spoke sincerely of his growing desire to marry and start a family. As the couple talked about the possibility of having children, the woman suddenly burst out angrily: "Well, *you'll* have to take care of the kids, too; I'm not going to do it alone!"

Both people were startled by this uncharacteristic response. In retrospect, they were painfully aware that this "slip of the tongue" had been a portent of things to come. After the couple married and had a family, this woman became increasingly hostile toward her husband and progressively withheld feelings of affection, despite the fact that he was sensitive to, and involved with, the children. Her angry outburst as well as her subsequent behavior represented a direct imitation of her mother's point of view that "taking care" of a husband and children was an overwhelming burden.

Becoming a Mother

Having a child of one's own is in itself the ultimate fulfillment of womanhood. Nonetheless, it symbolizes a separation from or a release of one's own mother, which can arouse considerable anxiety. Becoming a mother implies a permanent loss of one's mother. Starting a new family effectively signals the end of childhood, causing many women to cling to dependent, childlike patterns of behavior during the pregnancy and following the birth of the baby. Conventional views of women's helplessness and need for protection during pregnancy generally support a woman's return to dependency and self-indulgence during this critical period. Yet, soon after the baby is born, there is a complete change in the emotional climate. Now the woman is expected to take care of and nurture the baby. The abrupt change from being taken care of to being a caretaker may foster a wide range of regressive behaviors and is a significant factor in postpartum depression.

Fear and Unconscious Hostility in Pregnant Women. Klaus and Kennell (1976), well-known developmental psychologists, have suggested that pregnant women have many fears that form the basis for the wide variation in the quality of the mother-infant relation.

> The production of a normal child is a major goal of most women. Yet most pregnant women have hidden fears that the infant may be abnormal *or reveal some of their own secret inner weaknesses* [italics added]. (p. 42)

Dr. Berry Brazelton (1973), a well-known pediatrician and child developmentalist, observed that:

> Prenatal interviews [in a psychoanalytic interview setting] with normal primiparas [first-time mothers]....uncovered anxiety which often seemed to be of pathological proportions.... The unconscious material was so loaded and so distorted, so near the surface, that before delivery one felt an ominous direction for making a prediction about the women's capacity to adjust to the role of mothering. (p. 260)

Rheingold (1967) observed similar phenomena in well over 2,500 cases of pregnant women he treated during a 10-year experimental study. He found that the mother's ambivalence usually continued unabated long after the child was born, although the more negative aspects were either completely forgotten or partially repressed. He suggested that even "normal" mothers transmit their basic conflict about being a mother and their repressed hostility to their infant, instilling in the child a deep sense of anxiety and insecurity.

Psychoanalyst Dorothy Bloch (1985) found that all children have a predisposition to fear infanticide and that these fears vary only in their intensity. In her book, *So the Witch Won't Eat Me* (Bloch, 1978), she states: "Once I began to probe the function of children's fantasies, it became apparent that they were a means of survival and defended the children against their fear of infanticide" (p. 13).

Postpartum Disturbances. Regression during pregnancy generally continues until delivery, when there is either movement toward recovery or a more pronounced regression. The dynamics of postpartum depression indicate intense emotional reactions to the sudden shift from a childlike mode to the reality and responsibilities of being a parent. These depressive reactions sometimes reach psychotic proportions.

In a case report, Rosberg and Karon (1959) described in depth a classic example of postpartum psychosis. A number of important factors in this case relate to our own findings: (1) It became clear though analysis that the woman's husband had, in many ways, replaced her mother as the center of her emo-

tional life (the primary feeder). (2) Sexuality was symbolic of oral gratification (vagina/mouth; penis/breast; semen/milk). (Comparable use of oral symbolism has been described in the analysis of less disturbed individuals. Silverberg (1952) and Klein (1948/1964) reported dreams and fantasies of neurotic patients indicating that many people represent sexual functions in terms of oral symbolism.) (3) Pregnancy represented a symbolic solution to frustration on an oral level. The physical changes that were manifested signified oral gratification (stomach filled with milk). (4) The actual childbirth represented a catastrophic loss of gratification and a premature demand to feed another. This series of hypotheses casts light on some of the unexplained characteristics of postpartum disorders.

One further complication that often occurs at the time immediately after the delivery, when mother and child return home, is the appearance of the mother's mother on the scene. This occurrence generally tends to precipitate regressive trends in the new mother. Instead of relieving anxiety, it often causes additional tension.

Early Feeding Experiences. Helene Deutsch (1945), in her classic work, *The Psychology of Women, Volume 2*, has suggested that the nursing mother may regard her child as an enemy and his/her oral needs as aggressions. More importantly, she may also fear her own aggressive reactions to her infant and may therefore fail in her attempt to breast-feed him/her in order to escape the situation and protect the child against her aggression. We have interviewed a number of mothers who reported that they resented feeding their infants. Several mothers revealed that they had initially enjoyed breast-feeding, but soon found themselves giving up what had been a pleasurable experience for them, often for no apparent reason.

For example, a woman stopped breast-feeding her three-month-old infant daughter following her mother's visit. Later, in a parenting group, she recalled that her mother was unable to breast-feed her or her younger brothers (Parr, 1987):

> When my daughter was 3 months old and my parents came to visit, I was too embarrassed to breast-feed in front of my mother. Right after that, I thought of a bizarre reason to stop breast-feeding, that it would be better for her to be on a bottle. So I stopped breast-feeding without ever making the connection that it followed that visit.

My sister had a similar experience that was even more uncanny. When she had her first baby, my mother visited for a week to help her out. My sister tried and tried to breast-feed her baby, but she couldn't. She had no milk and finally after trying everything, she had to put her baby on a formula. The very day my mother left, my sister's milk "came in" and she was able to breast-feed. It's interesting, because my mother couldn't breast-feed me. And I have brothers who are much younger than I am, and so I remember watching her trying to breast-feed them. One scene I remember clearly was when I was 7 years old, standing in the doorway, and my mother holding my baby brother and trying to feed him. Her milk would flow until the baby would start to suck, and then it would stop—that's how withholding she was.

I remember my father being angry at her for what she was doing. He just couldn't help being angry. He saw it right in front of him, that she wouldn't feed the baby. I remember standing there; I didn't want to see it. I wanted to turn around and walk out of the room, but my feet were frozen. I couldn't move; I was just frozen standing there staring at that scene.

OTHER ISSUES IN THE PSYCHOLOGY OF WOMEN

Sexual Components in the Early Maternal-Child Attachment

In our work, we have observed that the majority of women reported that they were physically and even sexually attracted to other women. This basic attraction appeared to be based on the early need for affection and physical comfort from the mother, a part of the child's earliest feelings. These feelings represented a natural attraction and did not appear to be a signal or sign of abnormality.

Many clinicians have reported that inhibitions against a baby daughter's expressions of affection toward the mother are stronger than against the son's. For this reason, the daughter's initial attraction to the mother can be frustrated early in the relationship. "[Women's] feelings for their baby daughters may frighten them if they label them sexual. This can lead mothers to limit their physical contacts with their young daughters severely." (Caplan, 1981, p. 59).

Other researchers have observed that many mothers are more hesitant about expressing affection to their daughters than toward their sons and that this reluctance has a damaging effect on the girl's later sexual development. Sirgay Sanger, in a personal communication to Nancy Friday (1977) stated: "The subtle deprivation of physical demonstrations of affection that little girls often suffer from their mothers makes women more vulnerable to fear and the loss of attachment" (p. 58).

Sanger's observation corresponds to our findings regarding the damaging effects of maternal withholding on children, especially on female offspring. We use the term withholding to imply that mothers actually hold back or inhibit their positive responses. The implication is that these feelings really do exist, but they are suppressed or repressed, thereby restricting expressive behaviors. The daughter's peripheral awareness that affection is potentially available causes her to develop powerful longings and emotional hunger for physical contact.

In cases in which the woman was loved and cared for initially and later was not responded to or inconsistently responded to, a pull is exerted that has an addictive quality. She feels compelled to try to recapture the love she once experienced, and this desperate search persists into her adult life, distorting her relationship with her husband and children.

Effects of Repressing the Original Physical Attraction to the Mother

Sexual Withholding. A mother who is intolerant of accepting love from her daughter creates a feeling in the child that her physical touch is unacceptable or even repulsive. This deep-seated belief causes the child to develop a strong feeling of being unlovable, and she ultimately sees herself as different from other women, undesirable, or unattractive to men. In addition, reactions of rage because of the early frustration of her desire for physical contact can lead to an immature fixation on the mother or substitute objects and a variety of sexual disturbances. Perversely, the anger generated causes the young woman to rely heavily on repression and to move closer to her mother. This alliance plays a significant role in her sexual withholding as an adult.

Sexual withholding refers to the holding back of one's natural sexual desire and its expressions: physical affection, touching, qualities and physical characteristics that are attractive and appealing, and all other aspects of one's natural, healthy sexuality. Most women are very ashamed of holding back sex and physical affection from the men they profess to love. Other women refuse sex outright or offer a variety of excuses. When women "hold back their natural responsiveness or enthusiasm for sex, a shadow is cast on the relationship, and the effects are profoundly detrimental to both partners" (Firestone, 1985, p. 373). A sexually withholding woman tends to hold back affectionate responses from her children as well or may feel very awkward expressing physical affection. Her inhibited response to her children is very similar in style to the manner of withholding she manifests toward her husband.

Women's sexual withholding has a powerful manipulative effect on men with whom they are involved. In general, the extent to which a man is sexually attracted to his partner is very dependent on her honest, sexual wanting. Men tend to blame themselves for any lack of sexual attraction to their partners regardless of circumstances. Even when they are outwardly critical and fault-finding with the women in their lives, men are extremely self-critical and self-destructive on this particular issue.

Although many women eventually become withholding in long-term sexual relationships, nevertheless, there are numerous disguised manifestations of this pattern, such that even a woman who is overtly sexually aggressive may be acting in a way to provoke rejection without being aware of her actions. These women tend to blame men for not making love to them and have evidence to back up their complaints. However, most men find it difficult to respond when the woman's seductive behavior does not reflect an honest desire for sexual intimacy. At this point, most men resort to sexual fantasy or increased physical movement in order to attempt to complete the sex act.

In many cases, insecure women have a strong need to control every aspect of the sex act, i.e., the time, the place, the position, and movements and the frequency of the couple's sexual relations. My clinical experience has shown that many women attempt to control the amount of sexual gratification they receive from their partners, even when they find sexual experiences fulfilling.

In conclusion, the psychodynamics involved in sexual withholding are similar in some respects to those manifested in postpartum disturbances, al-

though the symptoms may be less dramatic. The withholding woman has reverted to a regressed state in which she desires to be fed, symbolically. In effect, she is striving for an unfeeling, automatic connection, similar to her original bond with her mother, and tends to lose empathy and genuine feeling for her husband. Although she may remain adult or mature in her work or career (behaving logically and rationally), on a deeper emotional level she has retreated into an inward, immature state of being. She is once again her mother's daughter, guilty about sex, distrustful of men, and self-hating. Renouncing her strivings toward meaningful goals in her life leads to increased dependence on maternal substitutes and symbolic reinstatement of the bond with her mother.

SUMMARY

Because the mother is generally the key figure in the family, she plays a central role in its emotional stability. The withholding tendencies in the mother have an enormous impact on her sons and on her daughters and are perpetuated within the context of the new family, when the daughter, now mother, emerges as the most significant figure.

Our clinical experience with a specialized parents' group has demonstrated that self-awareness of hostile as well as nurturing feelings can have a constructive effect on a mother's efforts to minimize damage to her offspring. We have observed progress in women as they have come to understand the division in themselves between their strivings toward independence and sexual fulfillment and the debilitating tie to their mothers. As they break down this bond, they allow themselves more fulfillment and manifest a stronger identity. Paradoxically, learning to deal with this side of one's personality and understanding the sources of this aggression relieves a woman's guilt feelings rather than creating further guilt reactions and self-hatred. Recognizing the subtle manifestations and effects of maternal hostility has value both as an explanatory principle and as a method for minimizing the detrimental effects.

We contend that when women are alienated from men and have strong sexist views, these attitudes have an even greater detrimental effect on them than cultural processes that deprive them of their full rights and potentiality. Indeed, guilt and anxious attachment to the mother that perseverate into adult life seriously impede women in their search for equality, maturity, and independence. Furthermore, we suggest that feminist literature and approaches based on malice and animosity toward men are extremely damaging to women, despite the fact that they represent a movement in the right direction, politically and economically. Thus, women walk a fine line in fighting for their rights as equals, and, at the same time, not turning against a part of themselves that is basically loving and naturally drawn to men.

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